Background on Trained Medical Providers

Nurse practitioners (NPs) are advanced practice registered nurses who have pursued higher education, a master’s or doctorate degree, and certification as a NP. In order to be more competitive in today’s job market, many NPs now pursue additional specialty education and training in pediatrics, geriatrics, women’s health, while many remain focused on providing primary care. NPs play an important role in the health care delivery system and provide care in a variety of settings including hospitals, community clinics, and private practice settings including in many medically underserved communities throughout the state. There are approximately 17,000 nurse practitioners licensed by the Board of Registered Nursing in California.

Doctors of optometry are extensively educated and trained according to a national standard. California doctors of optometry complete four-years of undergraduate education and four years of post-graduate education, and many complete one year of residency. Doctors of optometry have more than 100 class hours in pharmacology, equal to that of medical practitioners, dentists and podiatrists. Optometric doctors are on the front line of eye and vision care and understand how early diagnosis and treatment of conditions like diabetes and hypertension can save millions of dollars downstream. Optometric doctors can do more than measure and correct vision and prescribe and fit lenses. They are able to monitor blood pressure and provide other basic primary care services. California is home to three of the nations leading schools of optometry. There are about 6,000 doctors of optometry practicing in 53 of California’s 54 counties.

Pharmacists provide patient care that optimizes medication therapy and promotes health, wellness, and disease prevention. Pharmacy education consists of a post graduate doctoral program, which now extensively covers direct patient care, disease prevention and management, and requires clinical rotations in a variety of health care settings. Many graduates also complete a post-doctoral residency or other certificate programs in specialty practices. There are almost 40,000 licensed pharmacists in California. To earn a Doctor of Pharmacy you need a four-year undergraduate degree and complete a four-year doctoral program. Programs are highly competitive. The current pharmacy class at USC received over 1,000 applications and admitted only 260.

California Must Bridge the Provider Gap

The New York Times
EDITORIAL • DECEMBER 15, 2012

“There is already a shortage of doctors in many parts of the United States. The expansion of health care coverage to millions of uninsured Americans under the Affordable Care Act will make that shortage even worse. Expanding medical schools and residency programs could help in the long run.

But a sensible solution to this crisis – particularly to address the short supply of primary care doctors – is to rely much more on nurse practitioners, physician assistants, pharmacists, community members and even the patients themselves to do many of the routine tasks traditionally reserved for doctors.

There is plenty of evidence that well-trained health workers can provide routine service that is every bit as good or even better than what patients would receive from a doctor. And because they are paid less than the doctors, they can save the patient and the health care system money.”
The Affordable Care Act

Under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), signed into law by President Obama, an estimated five to seven million Californians will have access to health insurance starting in 2014. The ACA will also provide for expanded and improved primary care.

The Problem

California is facing a severe shortage of primary care doctors. Under the ACA, many newly insured Californians will have a pent-up demand for services and will create even more pressure on our strained healthcare system.

According to a 2009 study by the California HealthCare Foundation, only 16 of 58 California counties had sufficient primary care doctors as measured against standards set by the American Medical Association. In addition the Association of American Medical Colleges estimates that the nation could reach a shortfall of nearly 100,000 doctors by 2020.

“W e are working hard at the state level to ensure every Californian has access to affordable, quality health coverage, but what good is a health insurance card if you can’t get into see a health care provider when you need one? My goal is to make better use of the trained healthcare workforce we already have in order to bridge the provider gap and ensure that every Californian has access to quality healthcare.”

– State Senator Ed Hernandez

Utilizing the Healthcare Continuum to Increase Access to Care

SB 491 – Allows nurse practitioners (NPs) to establish a standardized procedure that will enable them to perform all tasks consistent with their education and training while working in collaboration with physicians and other health care providers. Study after study recommends that NPs should practice to the full extent of their education and training, especially in rural and low-income communities where doctors are in short supply. State nursing boards in 17 states and the District of Columbia already allow these nurses to practice in collaboration with physicians, but not under their direct supervision. The nurses can order diagnostic tests, prescribe medications and manage treatments – among other services – performing many tasks that physicians traditionally provide.

SB 492 – Doctors of optometry play a critical role in providing primary care and making the ACA a reality. SB 492 will remove restrictions to permit doctors of optometry to examine, prevent, diagnose and treat conditions and disorder of the visual system and human eye. It would also give doctors of optometry the ability to intervene and immediately initiate treatment for patients who may have diabetes or high blood pressure. Because there are nearly twice as many eye exams performed each year compared to annual physicals, doctors of optometry often detect these conditions during routine eye exams. Adding doctors of optometry to the primary care team means more opportunities to intercept a patient with one of these conditions and begin treatment immediately. SB 492 allows for immediate treatment of patients saving them from more doctor appointments thereby reducing costs.

SB 493 – Pharmacists would be positioned as health care providers, including them as members of the care team. Pharmacists are the foremost experts in medications, and more than 80 percent of health conditions are treated with prescription medications. SB 493 expands the types of settings where a pharmacist can practice. SB 493 aligns pharmacists’ scope of practice with their level of training and will align California with federal programs such as the Veterans Administration and the Indian Health Service where pharmacists have been practicing in this collaborative way for 50 years. It will help streamline the process for obtaining authority to provide immunizations and make it easier for physicians to refer patients to the pharmacist member of the care team for ongoing management. It will also empower pharmacists working in collaboration with physicians, health facilities, and other systems of care to better manage patients with conditions like diabetes and hypertension.

“The Affordable Care Act will add hundreds of thousands of people to the rolls of the insured. That’s good,” said Dr. G. Richard Olds, founding dean of the UC Riverside School of Medicine. “But where are the primary care physicians going to come from to serve that population?”

– CHCF Center for Health Reporting | June 29, 2012

After Massachusetts enacted health reform legislation in 2006 it found that patients were forced to wait an average of 44 days to get an appointment, 29 days longer than 2005. Considering that Massachusetts had a higher ratio of physicians to residents, the task facing California lawmakers is daunting.

The Solution

Senator Ed Hernandez has introduced a comprehensive package of bills to deal with the serious shortage of primary care physicians in California. This package will help California use our existing workforce of medically trained professionals more effectively to bridge the gap.

“ ‘Our country’s best academic and clinical researchers have produced premier studies confirming the safety and quality of care these professionals provide.”

– Catherine Dow er

Associate Director, Center for the Health Professions, UC-San Francisco

Should CA Expand Providers’ Scope of Practice | California Healthline March 7, 2013